

## Opening Words

We are here  
*as children of the universe,*  
brothers and sisters in all things  
*including sorrow and joy, longing and love.*  
Remembering that hearts ask for transformation  
*no less than the bud which opens to flower*  
we center ourselves with these words  
**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,**  
**moved by the beauty of the world**  
**and claiming justice for all who live upon it,**  
**we open our hearts to greater loving,**  
**healthier knowledge, deeper compassion**  
**and hope of peace.**

**Sequence** (this worked especially well with the chancel focus, all in red and yellow)

I think aloud, O Love, I think aloud.  
I have noted that the blood  
of every human being on earth is red.  
And some of the loveliest hothouse flowers are red too, rosy in a way, or like a flame of spring tulips..  
The dawn, I notice, often shades more toward yellow, like the saffron rice you find in Habana, Barcelona and Madras.  
Each version of each color is unique.  
Each, beautiful.  
How wonderful that red may be vermilion, scarlet, cardinal, rose, ruby maroon, coral or port.  
How extravagant that yellow may be blond, mustard, gold, ochre, lemon, canary, flaxen or straw.  
Each color brings intensity and delight  
in its own way, yet both beguile equally.  
Each color, like every human life I know,  
a variety of something universal,  
yet utterly distinctive, singular, unrivaled,  
and unequalled.  
Each, like every human life I know,  
unparalleled, yet at the very same time  
paralleled, equal in dignity and worth,  
concurrent, analogous, similar and alike.  
Oh Love, you who dwell in paradoxes and  
poems, tensions and questions,  
your colors and words tell but half the tale.  
Now let silence begin to complete the story.

## Silence

Our stories are unique and at the same time, our stories are universal. Like you, O Love, we dwell in a world of paradox. So now let all here gathered give voice now, or image inside your heart, the uniqueness of your story. Silently, or into this universal air, name those who prop you up, challenge you, worry you, miss you, or whom you miss, for our worship is not about final teachings or unbending doctrines, but about real human hearts and real human lives in all their commonness and uniqueness.

*naming*

The colors of the world are unique; the people of the world, our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers around the world, living in our hearts as well as plowing in distant fields, are unique. But they are just like us, too; they've grown up to be just like us.

## Readings

***The First Reading** this morning is a poem by my very talented friend from my college years, Mary Jo Firth Gillett. She and her family and I get together over the Christmas holidays, and some of you may remember that she and our friend Jane came down from Detroit to my installation ceremony here back in 1998. The poem is from her 2004 chapbook *Chandeliers of Fish* and its called *Dad's Cornea Transplant**

Something, maybe the music on the hospital PA—  
soothing and old, those big band sounds  
that spun sex on the 78, women's long hair  
loose and wavy, Fred and Ginger at the Bijou—

something transported Mom, girlish again,  
dreamy, telling me how they met at a dance,  
how he moved slowly toward her in a baggy suit.  
And I knew what she'd say next—

she didn't have nylons because, remember,  
it was just after the war, so she knew  
he'd ask her friend to dance, the one who wore  
hose, seams traveling up the back of her legs,  
up under her skirt. But she remembers  
he turned instead toward her, and her laugh is  
bare white legs barely touching the crease  
in his gabardine pants, their two sets of feet

straining at the sharp right angles, the box step  
tracing the shapes of the parquet floor,  
their bodies the tug of a tethered kite.

What an artist might show with a glint of white

in the iris, the eye alert to the merest gust of wind rippling the lake, a black bass in the shadow of the dock, the sweep of its tail and delicate fins holding its place against the current.

## ***The Second Reading comes from an excellent book***

*called helping your aging parents by Dr. James Helpern, a book worth a read if you are walking that particular path. It's from 1987, but it remains fresh and insightful.*

The explorer Robert Peary reported that he spent one day traveling directly north to the pole. At day's end, he unhitched his dogsled and took readings to determine how far he had traveled. To his great surprise he found he was further south than when he had begun. How could this be true? There was no question he was traveling north, and he knew he had not gone over the top of the pole. Peary finally discovered that while struggling to go north he had been on an iceberg all along that was carrying him south by more rapid ocean currents.

## Sermon

On Christmas Day, as has been my custom since 1972 when I first moved out of my parent's home, I traveled to 36439 Gregory Dr. in Sterling Heights MI for Christmas Supper. This year, because of my schedule, we ate late, at 6 PM. Once Christmas supper used to be a big affair, with all four of my grandparents present, as well as my sister Lynne and my brother Robert. Then my brother-in-law Ron joined the table, and my constantly growing nephews Bryan and Kevin, and sometimes my sister's mother-in-law. This year, since my sister was eating with her husband's side of the family, and since my grandparents have been laid to their rest for some time, it was just my mother, father, and my brother and me.

The small table was simply set against the early evening darkening outside the window. My mother brought the traditional steaming bowl of what I assumed was *tortellini in brodo* to the table.

However, when I peered into the bowl, to my horror, there *were* no *tortellini* in the broth, just a few store bought noodles. And the broth was not homemade, either.

Now to anyone outside the Belletini family system, my horror may seem a bit overwrought. After all, there are plenty of people in South East Asia right now who have nothing to eat at all, and, who would love a nice bowl of canned broth steaming with store-bought pasta. Why should such a small menu change shock me so?

Well, for 55 years, I have always had my mother's homemade *tortellini* in broth at Christmas. Without exception. Even on my first Christmas as a baby, I hear she placed one of the little belly-button shaped ravioli in my mouth. Even in my strict vegetarian days, I would always relent for the Christmas supper of *tortellini*, filled with its creamy filling scented with nutmeg. My ancestors in the province of Emilia in Italia have dined on this particular pasta for centuries. On the *Feste di Natale*, Christmas Day, *tortellini* in broth. Always. Except this year. This year, it all changed.

I didn't let my mother know how undone I was by this. I just couldn't. She has become so frail. Not the mother I remember who could do anything she wanted to. She walks with a cane now. One of those affairs with four prongs at the bottom. She moves slowly. Haltingly. And with pain visible in her wince.

After supper, I told her gently that from now on I would like to bring the *tortellini*. "I know how to make them now," I assured her. (It takes about 6 hours for me...it used to only take her about 3. But I *can* make them.) Then I would freeze them, ice them in a cooler and haul them up to Detroit. I would ask my sister to make the steaming broth and bring it, and the grating cheese, over to their house.

I realized as I sat there on Christmas evening watching my limping, aching father, and my frail hobbling mother that the *tortellini* was a symbol for a much greater change. My parents are no longer my parents.

Or more precisely, my parents are no longer the parents I once knew. My father's once rather characteristic rage is slowly draining from him, leaving him wistful and philosophical and filled with stories he tells many times, as if trying to piece together the significance of his life. My mother has gone inward, reflecting on her long life, often smiling mysteriously, like some ancient Buddha meditating despite the presence of constant pain.

When my mother got sick with the stomach flu, on the day after Christmas, my father was panicky. I assured him it was just the flu, and that she would get better, and that I had the same fool thing just before Christmas. I reassured him that everything does indeed improve after a few days. I cooked some pasta with peas for him at lunchtime. To my surprise, he thanked me for soothing him in this way, and for helping him clean up and cook for him. He seemed deeply touched.

"Oh where are our dear mothers? O where are our dear fathers?" goes the old folk song the choir sang today, and I am beginning to understand the meaning of those ancient questions. They are profound, and the subject of my sermon today.

I come to this sermon not just walking the path of my life, but by paying attention. For throughout these last two years especially, many middle-aged members of this congregation have lost parents to death. And many more have struggled with care-taking duties for ailing parents, or parents who have been utterly lost in a cloud of forgetfulness: some sort of Alzheimer's, perhaps, or some sad dementia. Broken hips, repaired knees, cataracts, glaucoma, kidney and lung problems, weak hearts, and sheer fatigue of muscle and bone have changed many of our parents into beings quite different than the ones we remember from our childhood. Sometimes this change means they have gone from parent to patient. Sometimes, from parent to child.

Some of us in this room *are* parents. Young or middle aged parents. But *every single one of us in this room* HAD or HAVE parents. So this morning I am going to focus more on that reality than on parenting itself.

But even if it's true we are all born of parents, everyone's parents are different from every other parent on earth. So there are few common stories I can tell you this morning except those stories which illustrate the changelessness of change itself.

Even the few, utterly amazing 95 year olds who roller blade to church every Sunday, sew their own clothes and paint canvasses as good as Monet are nonetheless subject to the changelessness of change. They have changed a great deal... in body, face, memory, hearing, night vision and even energy when compared to their younger selves. Change, after all, is the one universal reality. Buddha the teacher in the Deer Park, Herakleitos the Greek philosopher, and Susan B. Anthony the prophet were right when they taught about its inevitability. Not one of us can stop it from sweeping us along. Change is the one universal thing...even ubiquitous death itself is subsumed under its banner.

But despite all this change, it's the *uniqueness* of our *individual paths of change* which matters for me this morning. Our unique paths as individuals no matter what age we are. I am convinced that we human beings who are born of parents, or adopted by them, know upwards of 8 billion different stories

about parents, since that is how many human beings there are on earth right now. Here are just a few...

1. Some of us *are* parents, and also *have* parents. Those of us in this position feel squeezed, caught between bringing up our children, and having to take care of our aging parents. This is a dilemma, to be sure.
2. Some of us lost our parents long ago, but we take care of some childless elder in our life... an aunt, a friend...who is going through the same things our parents would have gone through had they lived that long.
3. Some of us had a parent who hurt us so bad that we never got over it, and find ourselves resentful as we visit hospitals and change bed pans or hire day care nurses. Some few of us have actually had to cut our parents off completely, to keep our heart safe.
4. Others worship the very ground our parents walk on, and count them as our very best teachers about love and life. And there are a thousand stories in-between, all different, all profound, for Jung was correct...no one's life affects us as much as our parent's life.
5. One father I know of had migraines all day long in his younger years, and yelled brutally at his children and wife all the time, but supported the family with consistency, and never ever once struck his children physically. His children have mixed feelings about him...both fearing him and admiring his resourcefulness at the same time. Mixed feelings are the most common I hear about.
6. One mother I know clearly resented her children as the anchors that held her back from her dreams. So one of her children treats her as a friend, not a mother. The other child returns the resentment, angry that her mother was never really there as a mother.
7. One father I know was never there, always working, but somehow managed to convey his love so his children adore him. Another father I know worked all the time, and now is totally alienated from his children, who don't think much of him.
8. Some younger mothers and fathers raise their children deliberately differently from their own parents. Others use their parents as explicit models.
9. Some parents abused their children, mentally, physically, or even sexually. You and I have heard the story a lot in these last few years. But other stories must be told too...in other families, healthy forms of love and praise and support pervaded the two decades of upbringing gorgeously.
10. Sometimes parents are disappointed in their children. Sometimes children are disappointed in their parents, and that colors everything else in life.

I was talking to a man outside the church recently. He told me that his mother died fifteen years ago, but he has never forgiven his father for having affairs while she was still alive. And so maintains a pretty steady boil in his father's presence, even though he works with him at the same work. I talked to another man whose father and mother were the people with whom he most wanted to spend time. He wanted to vacation with them, talk with them about world affairs, and join him in worshipping his own children in their role of beloved grandparents.

In any case, despite the unique varieties of child/parent relationships as everyone ages, there are many *commonly recognized feelings* which surface in these relationships because of the absolute guarantee of all this change, change, change.

1. Guilt is huge feeling that dogs the tracks of parents and children. Young parents tell me that they often feel guilty that they don't know what to do or say in certain situations. But aging parents seem to feel a lot *more* guilt than they felt when they were younger because they are impacting their children's lives in such a major way. And their children may be feeling pangs of guilt because they think they should be doing more and more all the time, and should never allow themselves to think that they need a break. Or, they feel guilty for feeling so much stress about the situation.
2. Some feelings are hard to even sort out. The very expression of feelings may be different in parents of one generation than in children of another. Sometimes an immigrant parent was raised to think that expressing love in words was meaningless or foolish. Sometimes they were raised to think that criticism was a form of care, and nagging a form of faithful love. The grown up children in such a family may have to work on their own resentment that such expressions are the main expression of love they are ever likely to see, even though they don't find them very satisfying at all.

On the other hand, when these same children grow irritated with their aging parents' complaints, *they too* may revert to a twisted form of expressing love...their irritability may be translated this way: "I see you are having problems with mobility, hearing, and memory. Each of these things drives home to me that you are mortal and will die one day soon. I don't want you to die. I want you to live. So I am mad that you are going to die."

3. Some parents feel shame that they are no longer self sufficient and self-determining. The inevitability of change embarrasses them. Some children, on the other hand, feel shame that they live so far away from their blood family. The very fact that they accepted a job across the country all of a sudden begins to redden their face.
4. Sometimes depression visits both parents and their grown up children. The immense changes in both lives simply overwhelm and depress all other moods. There are a thousand decisions to make, many errands to get done, and yet everything seems to fall perpetually behind anyway. I think of Peary in the second reading trying to get to the North Pole, but moving south despite all of his effort. Depression is like that iceberg moving backwards faster than all the positive things we do to move forward.
5. Sometimes feelings of anger fester in the children, anger that they have to deal with such things at all. They are already overworked, and have no

time for family and friends. And now this... endless and *undeniably real need* from the aging parents. Guilt almost immediately follows these feelings of anger. Or shame.

***Now please pay attention to what I am going to say.*** All of these feelings are *natural*. They are not weird, mean, nor should they be surprising. All of these feelings are to be expected. They do not reveal weak character, nor suggest meanness of spirit. And all of these feelings must be felt, and faced, and shaped if anything positive is to happen. People need to find ways, perhaps by talking with therapist, clergy person or other trusted ear, to get off the iceberg dragging them back. And to remember that guilt and shame are *actually good feelings* ...if they are merely prickly reminders of some discomfort we need to deal with, and not ramshackle tenements in which to live for the rest of our lives.

The important thing, it seems to me, in the midst of all these common feelings, and after admitting how varied and unique parents can be, is to actually *stress* the unique personhood of our parents, whether they have been wonderful, or awful, or somewhere in-between. I think my friend Mary Jo's poem reveals this with stunning clarity. Her aging father is having surgery, but in the poem, as she and her mother wait, Mary Jo sees her mother as "girlish again" and imagines her father as some sort of Fred Astaire, wearing "baggy gabardine slacks" at a dance. She sees them as persons who knew romance, shyness, halting approaches, and yes, actually thought about sex. She sees them in a social setting...it's after the war, after all. Products like nylon stockings are scarce, but there is that incredible relief that the war is over and people can do what they are supposed to do, dance and go fishing...for bass, and each other.

When Mary Jo was growing up, I doubt that she ever imagined her parents as human beings. They were, well, parents. But as they aged, and maybe grew wistful because of their sharp pains or just haunting memories, who can say? Sometimes those roles of parent and child change, and it's person and person who walk center stage. These persons share a certain equality, despite their age differences, since neither of them ever asked for either their particular bodies, brain chemistries, social settings, environments or fortunes. Each plays the hand they were dealt, either for good or ill. Each is unique.

I think, too, of my mother, not as the tortellini folder, but as Elisa Pozzi Galli who married Louis Belletini one fine day in August of 1943. You can see her on the cover of the order of celebration on her honeymoon, on a ship in the Thousand Islands. You can see her young and strong, her whole life ahead of her, never imagining my strange career as a minister in an alien religion, never imagining my brother's swim team trophies or demanding life in an auto-dealership, never imagining my sister's bemused husband without an Italian name, or her daughter's mild case of MS. Instead, all she saw then were my father's eyes, his youthfulness just out of the army. All she could hear was sound of his laughter.

And so this Christmas I have suddenly come to see my mother as a person, no longer in the category of parent. Same with my father. Oh, his temper was sometimes scary to me when I was a kid, but now as a mature and understanding adult, I can suspect that his migraines may have had something to do with it. And my mother didn't always know how to support me during my most difficult days, but I knew she was always struggling to let me know how much she loved me. And now, I am in the place where I have to face *all* of my feelings, whether guilt, or confusion, or some sort of shame, or a bout with depression. And then I have to relate to them more as persons than as the parents who folded the Christmas *tortellini* together in the basement kitchen assembly line.

Next year, *I* will make the *tortellini*. I will knead the pasta and mix the '*pient*, the stuffing. I will fold the tortellini as my mother and father did together, and as their mothers Carmelina and Anna before them did. I will teach my friends how to do it, and they will teach their friends who will teach their children or their other friends. And when both my mother and father and I are gone, and everything that I now apprehend will have changed in just the way Buddha, Herakleitos and Susan B. predicted, at least one great symbol of love, warm and delicious and comforting, will nourish human lives a hundred years hence.

Being a parent is undoubtedly tough. Having parents can sometimes also prove surprisingly tough. And losing parents will often prove the toughest time of all. Still, I can tell you about something tougher. And that is the love which changes parents into persons, changes children into persons, and changes all our rough, rough feelings, finally, at last, into itself.

## Circle Prayer of the Generations

Circle round, circle round,  
and wrestle joyfully with the truth  
that always struggles to be true.  
The generations rise and fall. Amen.  
Each person alive imagines  
that his life or her life is just as important to them,  
as your life is to you. Amen.

Circle round, circle round.  
No one asks to be born into circumstances. Amen.  
No one asks to be born. Amen.

Each of us is mortal. Amen,  
The old no less than the youthful. Amen,  
The middle aged no less than the child. Amen.  
Every person is just that, a person first;  
roles are real, categories are not without sense,  
but every person is just that, a person first. Amen.  
Difficulty is the nature of life. Amen.  
Joy, friendship, adoration and love  
are still the divine heartbeat  
of this amazing world. Amen.  
The generations rise and fall. Amen.  
We are the world right now, not tomorrow. Amen.  
Not yesterday. Amen.  
Let us give thanks. Amen.

### **#191 Now I Recall**